

# **Public Comment Summary Biennial Season Setting, February 2012**

## **Introduction**

FWP received comments to proposed 2012 - 2013 hunting season regulations via the FWP website, email, hard copy mailings and public hearings. The formal comment period was functionally initiated December 8-9, 2011 with that FWP Commission meeting's process and adoptions. An "interested person" letter dated December 12, 2011 generally describing the proposed regulations was posted on the FWP website and mailed to an established list of interested parties including all of Montana's 56 counties and Tribes. Press releases were also distributed. This effort to public notice included identification of regional public meetings as well as commenting process and deadlines.

This summary focuses on 933 comment entries received electronically via the FWP web site. Not all entries spoke to all species or proposals. Not less than 44 written/email comment entries received through the deadline of 5:00 PM, January 23, 2011. A limited number of comments continued to trickle in after the deadline. Additionally, not less than 999 individuals attended 40 public meetings across the state in January. Meeting summaries (attendees were offered the opportunity to comment but were encouraged to submit comments electronically) and comments have been forwarded to the FWP Commission for review and consideration.

The vast majority of comments received were from Montana residents. Comment entries included unique inputs, repeating messages or "form" letters/statements and petition. Region-specific comments geographically localized were among comments received. Conversely, some statewide issues did reveal themselves consistently across comments. Recognizing the value of localized inputs at the hunting district or regional scale, comments were forwarded to regional staff as well as the FWP Commission. This overall summary is dedicated primarily to statewide and species scales.

Not a tabulation of supporting vs. opposing comment numbers (all topics enjoyed both support and opposition), this summary represents an effort to enumerate rationales, values, topics, themes and concerns that *most repeatedly* surfaced within the individual species categories in public comment. It also offers a brief and general FWP response. As a coarse summary, is not intended to replace, dismiss or represent all/any comments received and forwarded to FWP staff and Commission. Rather, this summary has been assembled only to assist all parties generally recognize and consider relatively consistent elements of public comment so that those elements at least (along with any others) may be better considered in light of proposal justifications.

## Specific Topics and Themes

### Generally Satisfied

- In response to the question of whether or not the commenter was generally satisfied with the current hunting seasons, not less than 62% of website entries answer “yes” singularly or with qualifications. 20% of website entries answer “no”. The remaining balance often didn’t directly answer the question or expressed some level of satisfaction with a focus on specific criticism(s).

*FWP Response:* There is considerable satisfaction with the current season structures. In this light, most season elements are proposed to be unchanged from 2011. That said, some of the repeated criticisms include concern over reduced numbers of deer, elk and antelope, wolf numbers (and other large carnivores) that are seen to be too high and/or impacting to ungulate populations, elk archery regulations and license prices. Current proposals (see Master List) do include reductions in antlerless harvest prescriptions for deer, elk and antelope, increases in black bear and mountain lion harvest opportunities and various options relative to elk archery. The 2012 wolf season is not included in this specific process but will be addressed under FWP Commission process starting in May 2012. License prices are largely addressed by statute and so are outside FWP Commission authority.

### Deer

- Concern over reduced population levels
- Diverse inputs to buck management
- Concern over impacts from large carnivores
- Mixed advocacy for youth deer and/or its timing

*FWP Response:* Current proposals include overall reductions in prescribed deer harvest and increases in black bear and mountain lion harvest opportunities. Proposed deer B license quota ranges may facilitate further reductions later this summer if winter and spring surveys indicate low fawn recruitment. FWP’s random survey of deer hunters conducted in 2011 suggests relatively strong support for current mule deer hunting season structure and timing. Options for youth deer season include adjusted dates and/or recommended hunter orange for archery hunters.

### Elk

- Concern over reduced population levels to include potential for individual hunters to harvest two elk and harvest pressure on public land
- Competing advocacies primarily for status quo and for 2007 season type relative to elk archery; considerable concern over new permits and structure associated with elk archery working group recommendation
- Concern over impacts from large carnivores

- Mixed advocacy for restriction on B license applications for successful either sex permit applicants
- Mixed advocacy for removing unique antlerless harvest opportunities for persons holding a PTHFV
- Mixed advocacy for proposed changes in HDs 313 and 360/362

*FWP Response:* Current proposals include overall reductions in prescribed elk harvest and increases in black bear and mountain lion harvest opportunities. Proposed elk B license quota ranges may facilitate further reductions later this summer if winter and spring surveys indicate low calf recruitment. Multiple options have been identified for consideration by the FWP Commission relative to elk archery to include some incorporation of elk archery working group inputs. FWP proposes no adjustment to elk B license applications for successful either sex permit applicants given the recognized value for one person to harvest two elk to assist meeting harvest objectives. FWP is proposing to remove unique antlerless elk harvest opportunities (and antlerless deer harvest opportunities in Region 1) for hunters holding a PTHFV to address expressed criticism from some hunters with disabilities. This proposal would continue to allow a hunter to use the PTHFV in the pursuit of antlered or antlerless elk as per specific hunting district regulations. Per local circumstances, FWP proposes the implementation of changes in HDs 313 and 360/362 (with some refinement).

#### Antelope

- Concern over reduced population levels at both hunting district and larger scales.

*FWP Response:* Current proposals include overall reductions in prescribed antelope harvest. Proposed quota ranges may facilitate further reductions later this summer if July surveys indicate low fawn recruitment.

#### Moose

- Concern over reduced population levels
- Concern over impacts from large carnivores

*FWP Response:* Current proposals include overall reductions in prescribed moose harvest and increases in black bear and mountain lion harvest opportunities. The 2012 wolf season is not part of this specific process and will be addressed in May 2012.

#### Bighorn Sheep

- Keep as is
- Look for more transplants/new herds; more opportunities
- Longer wait period
- Maintain/increase unlimited areas

*FWP Response:* Many season elements are proposed to be unchanged from 2011. New transplant opportunities are not addressed via this season setting process but FWP will continue to explore new opportunities. A waiting period is not proposed given the expressed general satisfaction and the current 7-year waiting period. Advocacy for a return to an unlimited season structure in HD 301 has not generated a proposal at this time but details of that possibility will continue to be explored given history of unlimited structure in that district, previous FWP efforts and communications to implement that unlimited structure and continued public advocacy.

#### Mountain Goat

- Look for more transplants/new herds; more opportunities

*FWP Response:* Many season elements are proposed to be unchanged from 2011. New transplant opportunities are not addressed via this season setting process.

#### Black Bear

- Later Spring season better fit to snow/green up and potential for additional harvest to reduce impacts to ungulate populations
- Add baiting and dogs
- Remove validation
- Good as is

*FWP Response:* Many season elements are proposed to be unchanged from 2011. Several Bear Management Units (BMUs) in Regions 1 and 2 are proposed to have longer spring seasons ending May 31 or June 15. Baiting and use of dogs are currently prohibited by statute and so are outside FWP Commission authority.

#### Mountain Lion

- Additional harvest to reduce impacts to ungulate populations
- Competing advocacies for limited license vs. general quota season structures

*FWP Response:* Current proposals include increases in mountain lion harvest opportunities. Mountain lion quotas may be further adjusted later this spring via FWP Commission process. The hybrid special license and general license season proposed in Region 2 maintains an element of limited licenses. While outfitters support a consistent hybrid approach in both Regions 1 and 2, there remains strong advocacy for the current lion seasons structure in Region 1. Consequently, FWP proposes no change to Region 1 lion season at this time. This does not preclude quota increases at a later time to include potential increases in female harvest for the 2012 season.

#### Bison

- Look for more opportunity

- Look for more area/tolerance
- Support Tribal opportunities

*FWP Response:* Primary season elements are proposed to be unchanged from 2011. The scope of this specific season setting process does not include additional tolerance areas.

#### Upland Game Bird

- Advocacy for proposed longer season for mountain grouse
- Concern for reduced turkey numbers in eastern portion of state

*FWP Response:* Nearly all season elements are proposed to be unchanged from 2011. Restriction on opportunity to harvest two turkeys in Region 7 is already in place.

#### Migratory Game Bird

- Advocacy for more geese in bag
- Advocacy for later season in southern portions of Montana with Central Flyway

*FWP Response:* Goose bag limits are proposed to be equal to maximum limits allowed by Federal frameworks. FWP not proposing a later season for geese in Central Flyway to avoid complication and confusion of a stop/start season in January.

#### Game Damage/Management Season Quotas

- Implement appropriately and effectively

*FWP Response:* Quotas are proposed to be unchanged from 2011.

#### Hunting Season Dates

- Leave as is
- Extend season for wolf
- Season extensions/later seasons

*FWP Response:* Season dates are proposed to be unchanged from 2011 with exception of calendar rotation. See "Deer" above for reference to youth season. The FWP Commission has previously extended the 2011 wolf season to February 15, 2012. The 2012 wolf season is not part of this specific process and will be addressed in May 2012. Game damage hunts, season extensions and management seasons are management tools potentially available to apply hunting/harvest after the general season.